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Diem's Death Showed CIA Law Unto Itself

Sometimes it takes years for the news to make page one. In November of 1963, any well-informed Washington correspondent knew that the Central Intelligence Agency had been deeply involved in the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, president of South Vietnam. And at the cocktail hour, in the capital's most frequent watering hole, the suspicion was frequently voiced that the CIA shared complicity in Mr. Diem's assassination. Today, almost 7½ years later, Americans can read the story over their morning coffee.

There are other CIA stories of some concern to the citizenry, but since they do not touch on the Vietnam war, they will not be found in the batch of classified papers now being pawed over by the nation's press. One such story is so incredible that I have not published it even though I checked it out just as high as you can go in this government without talking to the President. In the general letting-down of hair that has followed publication by the New York Times of the Vietnam papers, there may be some value in reciting my story — if only to use it as a peg on which to hang some questions about CIA operations.

Back in the early Fifties, the Central Intelligence Agency decided that it would be a better world if President Chiang Kai-shek, then digging in on Taiwan, would shuffle off his mortal coil. With the Generalissimo gone, all those pesky questions of Red Chinese admission to the United Nations would become moot. The Nationalist regime would collapse, and Mao Tse-tung could move into the vacuum. From the wish that President Chiang should depart this life to a decision that he be speeded on the journey was a small step.

Somewhere within the bowels of CIA headquarters, plans for the assassination of Chiang Kai-shek were made. A team was assigned to do the job and \$5 million was allocated — the money to be spent in setting up the operation in Taipei, bribing such officials as could be bribed, creating a cover, etc. I was never able to determine what non-CIA officials — if any — were informed.

But because CIA security at the time was about as watertight as a colander, the Republic of China's Intelligence picked up details of the plot even before the CIA team had unpacked its bags in Taipei. President Chiang was informed. According to my account, however, the Generalissimo refused to give the order to "take care" of the team. "Let's get their \$5 million first," he is reported to have said. The CIA team, therefore, was led down a cloak-and-dagger garden path, never getting within range of President Chiang.

By the time the money was spent, the Central Intelligence Agency had changed its mind — or had it changed by more responsible people in the United States government. The team was recalled.

When I checked out the story, the very important official who confirmed it said, "Sure it's true. CIA had a similar plan to knock off Syngman Rhee (then President of Korea) but we stopped it." In the context of the conversation, the "we" referred to the National Security Council.

That the two operations were scrubbed of course made a considerable difference to Presidents Chiang and Rhee — not to mention the course of history. But scrubbed or completed, the principle remains the same. The Central Intelligence Agency, as an arm of the American government, had taken

en on itself life and death decisions which involved the integrity of this nation and which could have generated results touching on war or peace in the world.

CIA, moreover, had embarked on actions which went far beyond the all-too-liberal license it had been given by the Congress in authorizing the agency. And that has been CIA's way in less grisly areas of its endeavor. It compromised the freedom of the press in the Fifties by hiring newspapermen as "consultants," thereby sealing lips and silencing criticism. Whether or not this practice has continued is anybody's guess.

The CIA's original function was to gather intelligence, not to interfere in world politics. There might have been some justification for its activities as one of many participants in Guatemala and in Cuba where it was involved only with the sanction of higher authority. But in the instant cases, CIA was a law unto itself. A thoughtful person might ask: Is it still?